

Natalia Chwaja

Pedagogical University of Krakow

“THE CITY OF PAPER”
RE-WITTEN. THE CITY
OF TRIESTE IN CLAUDIO
MAGRIS’ *MICROCOSMS*
AGAINST THE TRADITION
OF TWENTIETH-CENTURY
TRIESTINE LITERATURE

ABSTRACT

The paper briefly presents the main stages of the development of the Triestine literary tradition, which phenomenon begins to be widely noticed already in the 1930s. At that time, the first generation of a new Triestine literature (with its main pioneers – Italo Svevo, Scipio Slataper, Umberto Saba) became an interesting object of study for those critics and scholars who were able to distinguish some of its essential features. Subsequently, the author focuses on the idea of Triestine identity presented by a contemporary Italian writer Claudio Magris in a book entitled *Trieste. Un’identità di frontiera*. Then, the author proposes her interpretation of Magris’ novel *Microcosms*, presenting it as the most significant attempt of expressing both writer’s and city’s Triestine identity; a portrayal of the city of paper re-written in the language and style of an essayistic, autobiographical novel.

KEY WORDS: city, Trieste, Magris, *Microcosms*, palimpsest, borderland.

According to a modern Italian literary critic Carlo Bo, the city of Trieste can be described as one of the “sacred places” of the Italian culture (Bo 1991: XXVII). One of the major reasons to confirm his diagnosis is, without doubt, the uniqueness of the Triestine literary tradition, which phenomenon begins to be widely noticed and appreciated by both local/national and international public already in the 1930s. At that time, the first generation of a new Triestine literature (with its main pioneers – Italo Svevo, Scipio Slataper, Giani Stuparich, Umberto Saba) became an interesting object of study for those critics and scholars who were able to distinguish some of its essential features. It is important to highlight that, apart from some common literary characteristics, one of the most compelling link between those authors is their common urge to deal with their native city’s peculiar conditions, the unstable Triestine political status, multicultural atmosphere and international commerce’s influences. Today, over a century later, Trieste’s complicated cultural heritage is still a discussed issue. Modern Triestine writers also participate in this debate, offering some original reinterpretations of the past and trying to enter in a creative dialogue with their literary predecessors. In my paper, I want to present the crucial

aspects of this phenomenon, focusing, in the second part, on Claudio Magris's oeuvre, an original example of city narrative. In the analysis of his autobiographical novel *Microcosms* I am going to apply instruments and notions (re)discovered or developed within the field of modern geopoetics, a methodological approach defined by Elżbieta Rybicka as a "research orientation" elaborated in order to study and interpret the interactions between literature and geographical space (Rybicka 2014: 33).

"TRIESTE HAS NO CULTURAL TRADITIONS" – THE ORIGINS OF A NEW LITERATURE

In an attempt to study the phenomenon of the modern Triestine literature, as well as its performative role in the creation of modern Triestine identity, the best way to start would be to recall its first open manifesto, published in 1909 by a young writer Scipio Slataper in Florence, in an Italian literary magazine *La Voce* [The Voice]. In a series of so-called *Lettere triestine* [Triestine letters],¹ Slataper describes his own city – back then an important, Austro-Hungarian harbour and commercial centre – as lacking in cultural tradition and desperately needing a cultural and literary revival. By this provocative statement, rather than to diminish the importance of his own city's cultural heritage, Slataper meant to draw attention to its outstanding particularity which, as he claims, had not been fully expressed by any of the previous Triestine writers or intellectuals. According to his romantically emotional diagnosis, the cosmopolitan and business-oriented city of Trieste had its own, original personality, a deeply tragic character shaped by its contradictory inner realities. The tragedy of the city – at least from Slataper's point of view – consisted mainly in an unsolvable conflict of idealism and pragmatism – the urge to be Italian, represented by the active Irredentist movement on one hand, the economic growth and the political and cultural connection with the Mitteleuropean hinterland on another. It is though important to notice that Slataper did not consider the Triestine border-line status a purely negative or destructive factor. Both him and the other Triestine intellectuals gathered around the Florentine circle of *La Voce*, were surely aware of the creative potential brought by the city's multiculturalism, multilingualism and multiethnicism, of its privileged role of a medium between different worlds and civilisations (Pizzi 2007: 83). That is why – as Slataper suggested – Trieste needed a new, self-conscious literature, that would have expressed the Triestine "unique anxiety" (*originalità d'affanno*) with a new language and new means of expression (Slataper 1991: 768).

Slataper himself managed to fulfil his project only partially, due to the fact that in 1915 at the age of twenty seven he was killed in a battle of World War I, after he volunteered to join the Italian army against Austria-Hungary (Benevento 1977: 144). Nevertheless, his autobiographic, expressionist novel *Il mio Carso* [My Karst] published in 1912 seems to demonstrate the way Slataper chose to inaugurate the new era of Triestine

¹ The series of Triestine letters was published for the first time between February and September 1909 and consisted in five separate articles, presenting different aspects of Triestine cultural life (Brazzoduro 1992: 22). In my article I refer mostly to the first one, entitled "Trieste non ha tradizioni di cultura" [Trieste has no cultural traditions] (Slataper 1991: 763–768).

literature (Isnenghi 1958: 5–11). Although it is not my goal now to analyse Slataper’s poetics in detail, it is important to highlight some of its main aspects, frequently quoted for the way they reflect the whole generation’s artistic interests, choices and paradigms. The first generation of the new Triestine literature, to whom an Italian critic, Pietro Pancrazi refers also as to a “family of writers” (*una famiglia di scrittori*) (Pancrazi 1946: 103–117) is, in fact, often presented as a relatively hermetic group of acquaintances, frequenting some of the most popular Triestine cafés, sharing ideas, experiences, topics and inspirations. For that reason, critics and historians who begin to notice and to study this phenomenon already in the nineteen thirties, tend to focus on the similarities between single exponents of the movement, in order to capture the very distinctive trait of the new literature.

In his article published in 1934, Pietro Pancrazi identifies for example the continuous need to question and investigate one’s identity as one of the leading features to be distinguished in all of the works he studied (Pancrazi 1946: 103–117). Apart from this deep introspective interest, other critics, such as Bruno Maier (Maier 1991: 7–26) or Renato Bertacchini (Bertacchini 1960: 157), mention moral engagement, sincere autobiography and anti-rhetorical anti-perfectionism as an equally common mark of such writers as Scipio Slataper, Italo Svevo, Umberto Saba, Giani Stuparich, Pier Antonio Quarantotti Gambini among others. Ernestina Pellegrini (Pellegrini 1987: 57), a modern Italian critic, underlines instead the influence of the bourgeois lifestyle and mercantile atmosphere of the Habsburg harbour, naturally, even involuntarily transmitted into those writers’ literary imagery. To talk about the way they represent the city itself, in my own research² I found it very useful to apply Vladimir Toporov’s category of the city’s text (Toporow 2000: 49) to demonstrate how Slataper, Saba and Svevo (but others as well) contribute to create a “Triestine text of Italian literature” and, in consequence, the so-called myth of the city.

Yet, the new tradition, invented and consolidated in a dynamic way I tried to describe above, begins to lose its main foundations due to the political transformations that take place both after the first and the Second World War. In 1918, the political organism of Austria-Hungary disappears, causing Trieste – now an Italian city – to lose its status of an important imperial harbour, as well as its connexions with the cultural life of the Habsburg capitals, Vienna above all. The Slataper’s city, at one time tragically longing for Italy, in the interwar period of fascism becomes an eager capital of italianity, some of whose new enthusiastic poets (thoroughly studied by Katia Pizzi in her book *Trieste: italianità, triestinità e male di frontiera*), identify the *Duce* figure with the promise of renewal, modernity and glorious future. Soon after, the II World War brings ulterior dramatic events, headed by the famous Forty Days of Trieste, when the city was occupied by the Yugoslav partisans (Pizzi 2007: 17–18, 51).

Nevertheless, after World War II, especially after 1954 when Trieste, after some years of unstable and undefined political situation returns to Italy, the – so to say – “original

² I use Toporow’s category for the analysis of triestine literature in my doctoral thesis entitled *Miasto w przestrzeni, miasto w świadomości – figura miasta w prozie Claudia Magrisa na tle dwudziestowiecznej tradycji literatury triesteńskiej* [City in Space, City in Mind – Figure of the City in Claudio Magris’ Prose Against the Tradition of Twentieth-Century Triestine Literature] prepared under the supervision of professor Maria Maślanka-Soro at the Faculty of Philology of the Jagiellonian University.

myth” of the city, of its tragic identity lacerated between the Habsburg Mitteleurope and Irredent Italy, becomes an important reference point for the Triestine authors who make their debut in a radically different reality of cold war. This sudden career of this *topos*, as well as its huge commercial success, becomes a study object for many both Trieste-born and foreign scholars. A surprising proliferation of a literature exploiting a romantically colourful repertoire of former-days-Trieste motifs, raises a rather sceptical response among those critics, who are afraid to see the real Trieste disappear behind a fancy postcard from the past. Katia Pizzi harshly describes this phenomenon as a form of nostalgic escapism, a selling technique of advertising Trieste with an image of Disneyland, “a private Disneyland of memory” (Pizzi 2007: 69).³

TRIESTE AS LITERATURE, AS BORDER, AS A LUMBER-ROOM OF TIME. CLAUDIO MAGRIS’S TRIESTINE PALIMPSEST

In my research I study the oeuvre of a Triestine scholar and writer Claudio Magris, born in 1939, who published his first academic work in 1963 (*Il mito absburgico nella letteratura austriaca moderna*), while his literary debut took place in 1984 (*Illazioni su una sciabola*). As far as the “myth” of Trieste is concerned, both his scientific and artistic production deserves attention. In the book entitled *Trieste. Un’identità di frontiera* [Trieste. A border identity], published “four hands” with a historian Angelo Ara, Magris analyses the 20th century literary evolution of his native city, starting from the Slataper’s manifesto, and heading towards the contemporary publishing market. In a chapter describing the post-war period of the 1950s, Magris puts the following remarks:

In those years, a new Triestine literature is born, a literature raised to the second power, a literature that wants to surpass the tradition and the myth, whose imagery is often based not on the natural, original city’s landscape, [...] but on a landscape made of paper, represented or invented by the previous writers. Svevo, Slataper and Saba described, with different grades of consciousness and reflexion, their own, inevitable reality, the problems of the real world they lived in. [...] The new narrative often reproduces only what can be called “a spectre of Trieste,” the collective imaginary, a collage of quotes and topics (Ara, Magris 1982: 189–190).⁴

What is important for me to highlight, Magris’s notion of the “landscape of paper” is not meant to undervalue the phenomenon, to which he dedicates a thorough study. Moreover, modern Trieste is often presented by Magris as “a city of paper” *par excellence*, a palimpsest of texts and images, a complicated texture of geographic reality, history, literature and personal experience. This particular way of understanding the city becomes clearly visible when we examine some of Magris’s favourite metonymies, used to depict the Triestine character in *Trieste. Un’identità di frontiera*. Three of them are especially important, while they encapsulate Magris’s idea of Triestine identity, being at the same time essential clues for the interpretation of his narrative. The author, in fact, claims that his native city **is** literature, **is** a border, and – last but not least – **is** a lumber-room of time:

³ This book is available also in English version: Pizzi 2002.

⁴ This and all of the other quotations from this book in my own translation [N.Ch.].

Trieste – maybe more than any other city – is literature, is its own literature. Svevo Saba and Slataper not only are writers that are born in it, but, above all, writers who generate and create it, who give Trieste a face it would probably not have otherwise (Ara, Magris 1982: 15).

Magris – as we can see – does not renounce the performative impact of the city’s cultural legacy, claiming, on the contrary, that when facing the city, the perceptive filter of tradition is somehow inevitable. What seems equally inevitable is the confrontation with the Triestine *nebeneinander* or, as Magris explains it, a strange concomitance or simultaneity of signs and events. In the Triestine lumber-room (*un ripostiglio del tempo*) things, though hidden and forgotten, last forever, one next to another, symbols of different worlds that never really came to an end and still are somehow valid:

The sediments and the detritus of the Habsburg past create a unique, Triestine humus, to whom literature can send its probes, from which it can also draw some vital lymph. [...] The Triestine *nebeneinander* recalls the detritus gathered on the seaside; among those detritus we see Stephen Dedalus, a hero created by Joyce who not without any reason felt at home in a tangled, static time of Triestine taverns (Ara, Magris 1982: 199–201).

Among those memorabilia (“sediments” and “detritus”), a few have an undoubtedly privileged status in Magris’s research. In the introduction to his first book entitled *Il mito asburgico nella letteratura austriaca moderna* [The Habsburg myth in modern Austrian literature] he admits, in fact, that his personal interest for this topic came from the inner necessity to understand his own city’s important, historical background. Even though then he considers some nostalgic, idealised portrayals of the past a harmful simplification, he underlines the necessity to rethink the Habsburg heritage, whose meaning is everything but obsolete (Magris 2012: 391–398). As far as the Triestine “border nature” is concerned, the obvious, geographical and political explanation of this identification does not need a further comment. A more interesting aspect of this Magris’s metaphor is the one that describes the process of interiorising the border, typical for the twentieth century Triestine society, for whom the insecurity of the city’s national status turned into a deeper, existential insecurity and disenchantment:

If Trieste is a border, in some literary works it becomes a way of livings and feeling, a psychological and a poetical structure. A border is a line which unites and tears apart, a cut deep like a wound that does not want to heal, a zone of nobody, a mixed territory whose dwellers sometimes feel that they do not belong to any definite country, or at least do not have this obvious certainty with which one identifies with his motherland (Ara, Magris 1982: 192).

Among all the considerations expressed in *Trieste. Un’identità di frontiera*, Magris does not discuss his personal, autobiographical relationship with the city, as well as he does not explicitly describe the ways it has affected his artistic development. In a collection of brief essays *Itaca e oltre* [Ithaca and Beyond] published also in 1982 he claims, in fact, that while it is difficult and embarrassing for a writer to answer the questions about his relationship with his homeland, it is much easier to search for the answer in the writing itself; because – as Magris explains – “a tale” shows it better, without a heavy pathos of an intellectual analysis (Magris 1982: 278–279).

MICROCOSMS – THE CITY RE-WITTEN

Basing on the author's remarks which I mentioned above, I would like to consider Magris's book *Microcosms*, published in 1997, the most significant attempt of expressing both writer's and city's Triestine identity; a portrayal of the city of paper re-written in the language and style of an essayistic, autobiographical novel. It seems that the strategy of re-writing the city's palimpsest can be observed on many levels of the novel's architecture: in the way the space is constructed, in the protagonists' personalities, in the type of narration, as well as in some intertextual games with Triestine literary tradition. In order to prove my point of view, I would like to demonstrate some examples of how each of the palimpsest's elements (city's border nature, the literary tradition and the history's lumber-room) can be analysed not only as essayistic *leitmotifs*, but also as key elements for the interpretation of the novel's original narrative structure and strategies.

To begin with, let us focus on the title itself, trying to define what exactly "a microcosm" means in Magris's book. In the two chapters describing the Triestine stages of the protagonist's sentimental journey: *Caffè San Marco* and *Public Garden*, the favourite leisure places of the city dwellers are represented not only through the description of their common, physical features, but as complex, independent worlds or heterotopias,⁵ where different spaces and times are juxtaposed to create a condensed form of Triestine "concomitance," a lumber-room of time, a nowhere and everywhere at the same moment. The famous café's complicated space organization gives the protagonist a peculiar possibility to face his own version from the past:

The San Marco is a Noah's Ark, where there's room for everyone – no one takes precedence, no one is excluded [...] Chessplayers love the café – it resembles a chessboard and one moves between its tables like a knight, making a series of right angles and often finding oneself, as in a game of snakes and ladders, back at square one... back at that table where one had studied for the German literature exam and now, many years later, one wrote or responded to yet another interview about Trieste, its Mitteleuropa culture and its decline (Magris 1999: 146).⁶

In a similar way the garden's space is presented; a separate place with its inner rules, regarding not only the dwellers' behaviour or "etiquette" but also their mentality, experiences and memory:

No dogs, no bicycles, keep off the flowerbeds. A beginning is often accompanied by a prohibition, even the beginning of a walk in a park, in this case in the Public Garden in Trieste. [...] One goes to the Garden for diversion, to sit in the sun or the shade (according to the season), to relax. Even when simply passing through it to get from one place to another, thus avoiding the traffic on the streets – for example going from the Caffè San Marco to the church of the Sacred Heart in Via del Ronco – the ties loosen, walking becomes a toboggan run. On some benches pensioners read the papers, on others the grand manoeuvres of a sentimental education are beginning [...] (Magris 1999: 3603–3606; 3627).

⁵ I am applying the term of "heterotopia" referring mainly to its definition offered by Michel Foucault (1986: 22–27).

⁶ Due to the fact that I am quoting the novel's passages from the e-book edition, from now on I am going to use the „Kindle location number" instead of the regular page number.

The heterotopic construction of space enhances its intense polyphony, thanks to which the voices of the dead and the alive can be heard simultaneously, the voices, that are always there, even though they “drift away like circles of smoke” (Magris 1999: 192). The statues of Triestine writers situated alongside the public garden’s paths also participate in this polyphony, expressing the meaning of the literary factor in the Triestine palimpsest. If in *Trieste. Un’identità di frontiera* Magris claims that Slataper, Svevo and Saba created Trieste by giving it an image, “a face” (Ara, Magris 1982: 15), now in *Microcosms* the marble faces can be directly confronted by the novel’s protagonist, and the manner this encounter is described in a parabolic way shows the relation between a modern writer and the tradition pioneers. It is also important to notice that the process of re-writing the city in a literary language of an autobiographical tale implies some significant changes of the way Magris confronts the Trieste’s literary heritage. For instance, while in his academic works and literary criticism studies some themes and topics appear mostly as objective research issues, in *Microcosms* the same themes are being creatively transformed into plot elements, personal impressions, visual stimuli perceived by the protagonist, etc. The following quotation presents Magris’ strategy of re-discussing Svevo’s irony and absence, main categories he applies to analyse Svevo’s writing for example in the 1984 *L’anello di Clarisse* [Clarisse’s ring] (Magris 1984: 190, 211):

Svevo is not far from Joyce and from Saba, near the little lake and the silt on its banks. On the marble base is the inscription, “Italo Svevo. Novelist. 1861–1928”, but above the base there is no head, all that is there is the pin which is supposed to support the head, looking like a miniature neck. [...] In any case one cannot but admire the genius of chance that, out of all possible candidates, chose not to deprive Pitteri, Zampieri or Cobolli, of their heads, but Svevo, the great, ironic narrator who once said that absence was his destiny (Magris 1999: 4042–4056).

What is more, many of Magris’s protagonists (among which all of San Marco’s habitués, with the author’s alter ego himself) can be interpreted as personalisation of the concept of border identity, presented, as mentioned above, in the book Magris wrote together with Angelo Ara. With the border interiorised, they spend time in a disenchanted atmosphere of the Triestine café from the Habsburg era, whose *genius loci* Magris depicts in the following way:

In the San Marco no one has any illusions that the original sin was never committed and that life is virginal and innocent; for this reason it’s difficult to pass off anything phoney on its patrons, any ticket to the Promised Land. To write is to know that one is not in the Promised Land and that one will never reach it, but it also means continuing doggedly in that direction, through the wilderness. Sitting in the café, you’re on a journey; as in a train, a hotel, on the road, you’ve got very little with you and you cannot in your vanity grace that nothing with your personal mark, you are nobody (Magris 1999: 242–247).

Among the café’s tables and the park benches, filled by anonymous characters described by Magris as “impersonal allegories” of some of the typical, Triestine Habsburg bourgeoisie attitudes, the autobiographical protagonist moves quietly, trying to define his place and identity inscribed somewhere in the city’s palimpsest. Near the end of the journey, he realises in fact how deeply his personal biography and the city landscape coincide, in what extent was his life conditioned by the city he grew in:

The screen is extinguished, swallowing up the years that slip like a train into a tunnel, and one goes from the Caffè San Marco to the church of the Sacred Heart in Via del Ronco, passing through the Garden for a breath of fresh air, through forests, lagoons, cities, mountains, snows, seas, and it becomes clear that it was all there already, from the beginning, and if later, in some other place, one stopped in a clearing or noticed an effect of the light or a shore, it is because they were recognizable and had already been met with in the Garden (Magris 1999: 4162).

The rediscovery of the identity hidden in the shapes of the native landscape does not finish the protagonist's quest, though. In the last, short chapter of *Microcosms* entitled *The Vault* the protagonist in an oneiric vision sees himself jumping out the Noah's Ark, straight into the sea. This mysterious gesture of escape, a paradoxical "cancelation" of oneself from the landscape of the city of paper seems to have a meaning on its own, signing Magris' attitude towards the self-reassuring, simplified and artificial definitions of identity, using Trieste as a convenient frame of clichés. By showing a Triestine postcard, finding there his miniature figure and then leaving the picture, Magris returns to the very original of "Triestine anxiety," consisting – as Scipio Slataper would say – in a continuous, infinite research, an inner conflict designed not to be settled.

CONCLUSION

The originality of Magris's case consists in his conscious and multileveled dialogue with the Triestine heritage. On one hand he elaborates his own definition of the notion of the "city of paper," in an attempt to capture and objectivise the heterogeneous, real-and-imagined nature of his native city, as well as the performative role of its literature. On another hand, though, he re-creates the city himself, by re-writing its palimpsestic "text" in a metaphorical language of an autobiographical tale. This strategy allows him not only to express his individual relationship with the city's landscape but also – as my interpretation of *The Vault* suggests – to perform an imaginary comeback to the very roots of the Triestine tradition, avoiding the picturesque trap of a referenceless simulacrum.

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